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THE CIRCULATION OF DESIRE: THE EMERGENCE OF UNDERGROUND MUSIC CULTURE IN THE 1970'S AND DELEUZE AND GUATTARI (PART I)

DOCUMENTATION, NONMUSIC DELEUZE/GUATTARI, DISCO CULTURE, NON-ART

(A project which is a few years old, but have been meaning to return to)

The project embarked upon by Michel Foucault in *The History of Madness* was an archeological understanding of the transition/translocation of the 'madman,' from the Classical to the Modern age; from the outer reaches of society to their confinement in prisons and hospitals. And within the annals of madness, perhaps there is another chapter yet to be added to the evolution of Occidental societies relationship to the "mad." A chapter, the memory of which, evoked responses such as this: "I want to tell you about walking into an oasis and feeling like I just walked into my family's living room. It was more than just walking into their living room, it was about completely being safe from the social restrictions of the outside. Everything that the moral majority told you you couldn't do, it didn't exist anymore. It was a family that only had one rule: to love thy brother... and that was okay."

The chapter from this history would seek to trace out the relationship between the formation of identities in the 1970's, the emergence of underground dance culture in lower Manhattan, and the theoretical works of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and radical psychoanalyst and political activist Felix Guattari. It is my belief that the sites of exchange where each of these three practices converge and diverge provide a deeper and richer understanding of the notions of "disco," "gay," and "sexuality" that was mediatized and codified into the narrative which motivated backlash against disco and everything it stood for.

I: A Brief History of Disco Culture

What is of interest for the current study is the construction of space, a *territorialization*, which made possible various sorts of communities: communities of disciplined bodies, communities of diagnosis, communities of exile, and communities of resistance. Michel Foucault highlights one such construction of space in *History of Madness* by tracing the progression of the exclusion of those persons considered "mad," culminating in the inclusive-exclusion of the great confinement, which paved the way for modern psychiatric practice. Alongside this era in which Foucault wrote, it is worth noting another type of territorialization at work throughout lower Manhattan with the emergence of what would come to be known as the "underground disco culture." The use of these terms 'underground' and 'disco' should not be taken as the vernacular of the era (early 1960's and 1970's). As one underground club goer notes:

"At the time no one looked at it and said, "Oh there it is, the underground!" It wasn't that. It was "What is this?..." And it epitomized... it went against all those stereotypical expectancies of what a "disco" would be like at the time...back then it was just a little bit after stonewall and at the time Black and Latino gays needed a place to go where they could be just free, and Whites as well. We didn't go in and go "Wow, this is underground." What we did say was "This is different." It was curious because it had a combination of things: organization, architecture, professionalism, atmosphere, music, sound system...But I didn't go around telling people I found underground. We didn't know it at the time; we didn't even label it as underground. We just said, "This is something you gotta check out!""

These "underground" spaces were the polar opposite of the inclusive- exclusion of the mad as noted by Foucault. Instead of disciplined bodies, or bodies typically seen as driven by sexual promiscuity, spaces such as The Loft sought to construct a new set of possible relations which went against biopolitical government or mediatized images of the (gay) body: "The Loft chipped away the ritual of sex as the driving force behind parties..." "Dance was not a means to sex but drove the space." Revelers refigured the dance floor as a site not of foreplay but of spiritual communion where, thanks to the unique combination of décor, space, music, drugs, lighting, and dance, as well as Mancuso's guiding party ethos, sensation wasn't confined to the genitals but was everywhere – in every new touch, sound, sight, and smell. Freud defined the sexuality of an infant in similar terms – he called it the polymorphous perverse – and while the Loft didn't enable a literal return to an irretrievable childhood it nevertheless functioned as the affective medium through which dancers invented new possibilities of bodily pleasure that didn't revolve

around genital sex. "There was an exchange of passion," says Lisa Hazel, who first went to the Loft when she was sixteen. "We would get off on each other's movements."

Created by David Mancuso, "The Loft was a community. If you didn't have money, as long as you had an invitation, you got in. Last thing in the world is to be broke, you want to be with your friends, and you can't go out and you can't do this and you can't do that... oh yes, well you can still go out and see your friends that night. Write down an I.O.U." Despite the awakening of political consciousness amongst various marginalized groups, it still remained difficult for gay men to "congregate publicly without fear of police harassment. In addition, many gay clubs were still controlled by organized crime, which severely limited the extent to which gays could control and socialize in their own spaces." (Discophobia, 284). Hence, it was Mancuso's intentioned response to his current socio-political environment to create a space, which would be made accessible to anyone, regardless of race, class, or gender.

Along with the combination of spaces such as The Loft, prominent police presence within the gay community, and within the underground music culture as well, the mediatization of "disco" through the film *Saturday Night Fever* contributed to disco's integration into mainstream culture as well as the heavy backlash disco would eventually experience. While *Saturday Night Fever* "kind of took disco out of the closet" with a protagonist who was white, male, and middle-class (an image which distorts the demographic of "disco" goes at the time), it also contributed to the explosion of disco music sales in the pop-music industry; so much so that WKTU, once a low-rating rock station, became New York's first all-disco station which garnered popular attention. This relationship between disco and rock, straight and gay, underground and mainstream, constituted the conditions of possibility for both the visibility of marginalized communities, and for the repressive forces which would culminate in the Summer of 1979.

Leading up to the events at the Disco Demolition held at Comiskey Park, radio dj Steve Dahl became the organ through which resentments against disco and everything it stood for were being voiced. Commenting on a song Dahl produced entitled "Do You Think I'm Disco," Gillian Frank nicely highlights just what was at stake in drawing his listeners attention to anti-disco sentiments:

"The song parodied Rod Stewart's disco song "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy" and articulated three main ideas: heterosexuality and masculinity could not operate within discos; men in discos were gay and effeminate; and disco culture threatened masculinity and heterosexuality. The main theme in "Do You Think I'm Disco" is that heterosexuality had failed within disco culture, and its failure was linked putatively to the failure of rock music and was attributed to two factors: sexually unavailable women and effeminate men."

Along with Dahl, John Holmstrom of *Punk Magazine* wrote: "Death to disco shit!...Long live the rock! Kill yourself. Jump off a fuckin' cliff. Drive nails into your head. Become a robot and join the staff at Disneyland. O D. Anything. Just don't listen to disco shit. I've seen that canned crap take real live people and turn them into dogs! And vice versa. The epitome of all that's wrong with Western civilization is disco." The efforts of persons such as Dahl and Holmstrom not only expressed, but helped create the image of the disco scene as predominantly gay, effeminate, degenerative, and as a moment in the historical progression of American culture whereby the moral value of masculinity was finding itself being called into question.

These overtly homophobic remarks about the disco scene in the 70's were not only motivated by resentment toward the place "rock" music found itself, but also fail to take into account the vast array of differences that constitute what "disco" and "underground" meant to those who participated in the community itself. It should be noted that at the time, The Loft was in a league of it's own; while most other disco clubs created the atmosphere of sex-driven parties and/or exclusionary spaces dominated by one community over another: "The Loft was about dancing, whereas the Tenth Floor was about dancing and getting laid...At David's, the group was too diverse for that. You would dance with a three-hundred-pound black lady and have the most fabulous time. That wouldn't happen at the Tenth Floor-they would screen that person out at the door. The Loft was warm and loving, whereas the Tenth Floor was sensual and sexual. There was definitely a feeling of, 'Let's go out and get laid,' and the Tenth Floor met that demand. It was certainly needed at the time."

Despite the differences between disco clubs during this time, the merit of each was the inauguration of the questioning of the male figure, and the production of anti-normative desire which found ways to construct spaces of subversion in response to the economic, social, cultural, and political confinements of desire.

II: Desiring-Revolution, The Revolution of Desire.

In March of 1973, Felix Guattari published an anonymous essay entitled 'To Have Done With The Massacre of The Body' in the 'Three Billion Perverts' issue of *Retherches*, as a response to the neutralization of desiring bodies and a call for the liberation of the body and all of it's desiring potential. He writes:

"And let us not forget the pleasure...of shaking oneself, of humming, of speaking, of walking, of moving, of expressing oneself, of feeling delirious, of singing, of playing with one's body in every possible way. We want to recover the pleasures of producing pleasure and of creating-pleasures which have been ruthlessly quashed by educational systems charged with manufacturing obedient worker-consumers. We want to open our bodies to the bodies of other people, to other people in general. *We want to let vibrations pass among us, let energies circulate, allow desires to merge, so that we can all give free reign to our fantasies, to our ecstasies, so that at last we can live without guilt, so that we can practice without guilt all pleasures, whether individual or*

shared by two or more people."

The thought of Guattari (along with Deleuze) helps us understand just exactly what is at stake in the liberation of desire, along with the ways in which liberated desire can become revolutionary. While his writings with Deleuze have focused on critiques of both psychoanalysis and traditional Marxism (most notably *Anti-Oedipus*), what is at stake in their analysis could be formulated in one particular way: guilt. The role of guilt, at the socio-economic level as well as the familial level, is a key point in understanding the disaster created by Psychoanalysis and its failure to terminate the process of analysis regarding repressed individuals. It was this understanding of the necessity for the reclamation and re-introduction to our bodies in relation to structures of repression and oppression, that drove Deleuze and Guattari's social and psychoanalytic critique.

In a brilliant inversion of the Oedipus complex, Deleuze and Guattari argue that it isn't so much so that a subject comes into the world repressed, but has his or her guilt projected onto him/her by the Father (Phallus, Other, Superego, etc.) and then begins to *believe* in the projected guilt as their own: "The initial theme of the key myth is the incest committed by the hero with the mother. Yet the idea that he is 'guilty' seems to exist mainly in the mind of the father, who desires his son's death and schemes to bring it about...In the long run it is the father who appears guilty, through having tried to avenge himself, and it is he who is killed...This curious indifference toward incest appears in other myths. *Oedipus is first the idea of an adult paranoiac, before it is the childhood feeling of a neurotic.*"

But why is there a need for the projection of guilt onto the child? onto the culture which emerged around disco music? The reason, say Deleuze and Guattari, is that similar to the projection of guilt onto the subject (subjugated-groups), taboo (the crossing of which produces the imposition of guilt) functions in the same fashion. Guilt and taboo are deployed, and impinge upon the subject-groups from the outside and re-appropriate its desires. And as Deleuze and Guattari write, it isn't simply that power is the agent of repression and oppression, but the possibility for liberation itself: "If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors." There would be no need for repression if it wasn't for desire. Moreover, the force by which desire is repressed provides insight into the power of desire to call into question existing institutions. Hence the backlash experienced by disco was exactly this combination of guilt and taboo in order to maintain the figure of masculinity in American culture, reestablish the position of rock music within the public domain, and provide moral justification for the immoral form-of-life of "homosexuality."

Thus the merits of underground spaces such as The Loft: not only did The Loft surpass all conventional wisdom as to what a "disco" ought to be, ought to look like, and ought to sound like, but moreover, The Loft operated as a space of liberated desire; a site which decoded the conventional norms and created a space for new semiotic subjugations – new ways of dancing, speaking, hearing, relating, and new *raisons d'être*. And as Deleuze and Guattari always remind us, it isn't enough to deterritorialize onto a new territory, but it's imperative to *continue* deterritorializations – produce a becoming-woman, becoming-minor, becoming-animal, etc. And it would not be an exaggeration to say that The Loft tapped into the collective desiring-machine at the time, even to the extent of producing it's own becoming-animal (a cross pollination):

"Jim Jessup used to come to the Loft, and I got along with him very well...One day he said he and a couple of friends wanted to open a Loft-style party that would be strictly gay and white. They wanted a private club atmosphere so that it would be more discreet, and they said they would only proceed if I said it was OK...I told them, 'Please, go right ahead!' I gave them all the help I could...*I said we were like bees and could pollinate.*"

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